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SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB AND INR

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRESIDENT'S SUPPORTERS CALLING FOR
EXTENSION OF HIS TERM - OR KING RAJAPAKSA?

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: A flurry of press reports and statements by GSL officials and ministers over the past several weeks has floated the idea of extending President Rajapaksa's term of office without a competitive election. These suggestions range from a proposal for a referendum that would allow Rajapaksa to hold an up or down vote on extending his term by several years, to a proposal for a constitutional amendment to make him President for life. A more fanciful but symbolically charged concept holds, with no apparent basis in history or genealogy, that Rajapaksa is of royal descent and should be anointed as a Sinhalese king. The President has dismissed such talk, saying all these paths would be undemocratic. However, some observers believe he may be allowing these statements in order to pave the way for a move to extend his term of office without a regular presidential election. END SUMMARY.

REFERENDUM PROCESS

¶12. (SBU) The current constitution allows for the holding of a national referendum in situations of "national importance." In 1982 President J.R. Jayawardena used this provision, Chapter 8 of the Constitution, to extend the life of the parliament in which he held a 5/6 majority. However, it has never been used to extend the term of a President before. Once the President declares (by his own judgment) that such a situation exists, a vote would then be taken of the Cabinet, with a two-thirds majority required for passage. That would be followed by a decision of the Supreme Court - all of whose members were appointed by President Rajapaksa. The approval process for such a referendum could be telescoped into as little as one week. Then, a single, nation-wide vote would take place. If passed by a simple majority of registered voters, the referendum would extend the President's term of office, presumably by several years.

PUBLIC CALLS FOR EXTENSION

¶13. (U) Several ministers recently expressed support for either a referendum or a constitutional amendment in public

statements. Media reported that a rally took place in the Dambulla on June 14, where local UPFA officials and supporters called for a referendum process to extend President Rajapaksa's term of office by five years, bypassing the regular presidential election due by November 2011. Several political pundits have floated this idea in the Sri Lankan print media. One such commentator claimed that the referendum idea had been broached in a cabinet meeting, but that President Rajapaksa had dismissed it as undemocratic.

¶4. (U) The Chief Minister of the North Central Province, Berty Dissanayake, said on June 21 that general elections for Parliament should still be held, but that a constitutional amendment should and would then be passed to make Rajapaksa the President for life. While a constitutional amendment would require the support of a two-thirds majority of Parliament, some feel the ruling UPFA could obtain such a majority if general elections are held soon.

KING RAJAPAKSA?

¶5. (SBU) Less realistic (but more corrosive to post-conflict reconciliation) are public suggestions that Rajapaksa should become King of Sri Lanka. Ad campaigns began appearing in government-controlled media and billboards shortly after the military victory over the LTTE, suggesting that Rajapaksa should be named king. On May 25, the chief prelates of the two leading Buddhist sects, the Kandy-based Asgiriya and Malwatte chapters, conferred the title of "Vishva Keerthi Tri Sinhaladeeshwara", or Universally Renowned Chief of the

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Tri-Sinhala, on President Rajapaksa. This is only the third instance in 2,500 years of recorded history that this title has been conferred on a head of state. In the other two instances, the title was given to kings of the now-extinct Sinhala royal lineage, who united the country under one ruler centuries ago by militarily defeating warring tribes within the island.

¶6. (SBU) Rajapaksa previously ridiculed political leaders who took kingly titles or behaved like monarchs. However, in late May he visited the sacred bo-tree (Sri Maha Bodhiya) in Anuradhapura, where the local chief prelates allowed him to embed jewels at the bo-tree site, a privilege reserved previously for the ancient Sinhala kings. State media has also recently proclaimed Rajapaksa as "Prince Diyasena", or the second incarnation of the Buddha. This refers to a Buddhist tradition involving Prince Diyasena appearing 2,500 years after the original Buddha to save the Sinhala Buddhist nation.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Holding a referendum would be the easiest and quickest way for President Rajapaksa to extend his term without an election. Many observers feel that the President might gain a larger majority in a yes/no vote than in an election in which he faced other candidates. A constitutional amendment to extend his term would require the support of more MPs than are currently in his ruling coalition - and there is no guarantee his coalition would gain enough seats in a general election to push an amendment through. The idea of crowning Rajapaksa King has been celebrated in song in government-sponsored TV ads, and may hold some appeal for some of his more ardent supporters. However, many others in his coalition are embarrassed and alarmed at such talk, and would likely put up strong resistance. In spite of his rejection so far of such proposals, some Embassy contacts feel that by allowing public statements such as those described above to continue, Rajapaksa is preparing the ground to later agree to a referendum or constitutional amendment, saying at that point that he is merely following the expressed will of the people.

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